

# American Gossip: Authentic Language Material for Engineering Students

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*By Tatiana Slobodina*

The new teaching goal for ESL in the Russian North East is to train specialists to use English in face-to-face communication as well as to retrieve, process, and exchange professionally useful information from various sources. This is the main difference between the new and the traditional ESL teaching programs. In the new approach, the teaching goal is no longer merely knowledge about the language, but communication skills for everyday life and professional or commercial exchange.

Teachers who try to reach this objective encounter problems with traditional textbooks. First, these texts present a mediocre variety of language-neutral, emotionless and absolutely inexpressive. Second, they fail to arouse student interest, because they are filled with "technical and scientific texts" that contain no new information to motivate them. Third, most of the texts are intended to train the students to master some abstract grammar points with no communication goal in mind.

Most students entering our institute after high school are false beginners with low motivation to learn English. There is no way to inspire them to use the traditional, dry-as-dust textbooks filled with Her Majesty's grammar.

My 10-year-teaching experience has made me believe that any person, irrespective of his/her age, abilities and education, *can* learn how to speak American English with great pleasure. The goal of English instruction should be to give students the chance and the means to speak the language. The task is to develop materials that are both efficient and inspirational.

## **Inspiring Creative Language Use**

A common fault of traditional textbooks, is underestimating the students' need for interesting content and creative activities. As a result, the only kind of information presented is language specific. No creative use is possible, for the language description would inspire only another professional linguist. There should be other kinds of information to motivate the students. (See Figure 1 below)

A communicative act has a definite context and purpose that determines the language variety to be used. This means that an authentic language textbook should provide students with information about language (primary) and culture (secondary). This should be considered in lesson planning. Background information carried in the textbook should contain general information about the foreign country plus some socio-ethnocultural details about the conditions under which communication takes place-including some cultural standards guiding behavior. (See Figure 2 below)

The primary and secondary information that I have developed is presented in the form of a multi-episode story about a family living in Jacksonville, Florida. Each episode is narrated and discussed by various characters-hence the title of the course "American Gossip." Its monologues and dialogues are highly emotional and truly authentic. The plot and structure of each unit gives the teacher practically unlimited opportunities to expand the language material through adding synonyms, antonyms, slang, and emotional phrases. (See Appendix.)

Another feature of "American Gossip" is its exercise format. Unlike traditional textbooks the course text has no pure drills. Every exercise has a communicative purpose. Exercises are arranged in three blocks: Think and Talk, Writing Activities, and Roleplay. The exercises provide multiple references to the authentic language in the text.

"American Gossip" does not refer only to the form of presenting the new material; it also reflects the specific way the content is elaborated. Talking about common acquaintances is widespread and natural and can stimulate broad discussion. It provides a natural motive to read the materials and speak English in class.

The textbook has no special section for grammar. As a rule, our false beginners have a general idea of English grammar. Their problem is the gap between their knowledge and their practical skills. That is why I find it reasonable to give grammatical explanations whenever needed in any form, from an annotation to a game.

One unit follows this order:

1. *Introduction* : using items of interest and fascination;
2. *Training* : various language drills, completing sentences, supplying illustrations, searching for sentences to match illustrations, analyzing situations, information search, etc.,-all communicatively motivated;
3. *Development* : think-and-talk discussions, roleplay, personalized discussions on associated topics, etc.

Each unit contains authentic materials (mostly borrowed from various American magazines) to be read at home. Some introductory information and communicative tasks are included, like problem questions and writing activities. Students are free to choose any item they like. Since they read different materials, an information exchange can be conducted in the classroom helping the students develop their language skills and speech habits. This arouses interest and motivation in language learning, as they get accustomed to treating American English as a medium for communication and information processing.

The results of this new course are very promising: the students demonstrate the ability to talk freely, expressively, and emotionally. They work easily with printed materials on various levels and show great interest in learning and using the language. They get eagerly involved in out-of-class language activities, like language theater, parties, etc. And, finally, they are ready to use their language skills and abilities in their profession, starting with writing their diploma thesis in American English.

No doubt, they are still far from advanced language proficiency, but one should not forget that for engineering students, the foreign language is the means to reach other goals, which they strive for while working with "American Gossip."

## Appendix

### **American Gossip:Family** ***Introduction (Audiocassette)***

*Lance Hamilton sent me an invitation. Next Saturday he's getting married. I hope this marriage will be luckier than his first, though they say the girl is some 12 years younger. . . so she's about 21. As I remember, Lance divorced two years ago. He's a nice guy, and I wish him all the best.*

*Well, the wedding was just as I expected . . . very modest and warm. Audrey is really charming. She's in her last year at the university, a future designer, if I'm not mistaken. A sweetheart . . . no wonder Lance fell in love with her. And she loves him, too. It's crystal clear.*

*Sounds like her in-laws are pleased. Lance's parents came from Hawaii. . . . His father even left his bank. What surprised me- Lance's sisters seemed to like his second wife. They are all married and live in Oregon, Kentucky, and Ohio. I remember they*

*were all against Lance's divorce. Well, all's well that ends well.*

*Lance and Audrey are going to spend their honeymoon in Barbados. But before that they will visit Audrey's aunt in California.*

**Conversation (Audiocassette)**

- *Hi, Mel, it's Lee. Did you hear about Lance?*
- *Lance who?*
- *Lance Hamilton, of course. He's got married again.*
- *You're kidding! I thought that after the seven years of hell that Jessica gave him, he'd never marry again.*
- *Same here. But all of a sudden he's gotten crazy about this university girl.*
- *Does he really love her enough to marry her?*
- *You bet! They adore each other, and she even left a boy-friend for Lance.*
- *Incredible! What a romance! I've never thought Lance had it in him.*

**Think and talk**

1. What do you know about Lance Hamilton and his family? When did he get married for the first time? What's his ex's name? Why did they divorce? When? What can you tell about his second wife? Where do his parents live? How many sisters and brothers does he have? Did they all come to his wedding?
2. What do you think the wedding ceremony was like? Where are the newlyweds going to spend their honeymoon? What other places would you recommend them to see? Why?
3. Who is telling the story about Lance's second wedding?
4. What kind of a personality does Lance have? Can you draw his portrait? Draw pictures of Jessica and Audrey.

**Roleplaying**

1. Tell Lance's story in the voice of:
  - Lance himself
  - Jessica
  - Audrey
  - Lance's mother/father
  - one of his sisters
  - Audrey's ex-boyfriend
2. Dramatize:
  - Lance's first meeting with Audrey
  - Lance proposing to Audrey
  - Audrey's first meeting with Lance's family
  - Audrey parting with her boyfriend

- Lance meeting Audrey 's boyfriend

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**Figure 1**

<b>Expansion potential</b>	
<b>Informatory side</b>	<b>Creative side</b>
1. Primary Information	1. Inspirational topics
2. Second Information	2. Creative tasks
3. Additional Information	3. Additional material

**Figure 2**

<b>Student's and Teacher's ratings of topics*</b>		
Students polled: 325	Teachers polled: 38	
TOPIC	STUDENTS	TEACHERS
Ethics	87%	26%
The United States	78%	47%
Ecology	76%	58%
Crime	75%	37%
Personality	70%	47%
Intelligence	66%	26%
Education	65%	26%
Human Relations	64%	58%
Ethnicity and Stereotyping	52%	50%
Perceptions on Aging	48%	8%
Money	48%	13%
Health, Fitness and Beauty	42%	21%
* <i>Percentage = Very Interesting+Interesting</i>		

**Results of Students' Ranking of Top Five Topics**

Listed in order of rank: Ethics; the United States; Money; Health, Fitness, and Beauty; Perception of Aging.

**Students' Rating of the 10 Most Interesting Subtopics**

Listed in order of interest: Pollution; Genetics; Racism; Subcultures in the U.S.; Cross Culture; Energy; Drugs; Terrorism; Ethics in Personal Relations; Abortion; Men vs. Women; Justice and the Law; and Euthanasia.